



Here's what we owe our veterans

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This year, the left-wing online magazine Salon.com decided to mark Veterans Day with a piece by writer David Masciotra whose title speaks for itself: "You don't protect my freedom: Our childish insistence on calling soldiers heroes deadens real democracy."

The Internet quickly exploded in outrage, which was presumably the desired effect: If nothing else, outrage comes with a lot of page views. But, deliberate provocation aside, it is certainly legitimate to raise the question of what we owe our veterans in an individualist culture and in an age of unpopular, morally ambiguous wars.

To be sure, Masciotra's article contains several debatable propositions. He claims, for instance, that Americans worship the military; in fact, the United States has never been a particularly militaristic society. We have no parades showing off the might of our tanks and missiles in our city centers; comparatively few of our cultural heroes are soldiers, and U.S. presidents who were veterans did not wear a uniform as part of their public image.

He tries to indict the military by invoking shocking statistics on sexual assault in its ranks; but those numbers are based on extremely broad definitions that include a slap on the backside at an alcohol-soaked party, and by such standards, American universities may be an even bigger hotbed of sexual violence.

Finally, Masciotra claims that our lionization of American soldiers leads us to excuse their cruelties toward local populations; but few Americans were willing to excuse the abuses at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq.

But Masciotra has a point when he says that the last time American soldiers fought a war that was clearly about protecting our freedom was 70 years ago, during World War II. One may argue that the wars in Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq were fought against forces opposed to freedom; one may argue that at least some of those wars were fought to strengthen the international standing of democracies. But there is no consensus on their goals and accomplishments, and even those who support the military action would find it hard to make the case that without those wars, we would not be free today.

Our attitude toward the military is further complicated by the fact that the traditional military ethic of self-sacrifice and obedience to authority conflicts with the prevalent American ethic of self-realization and personal autonomy, embraced both by liberals and by libertarian-leaning conservatives.

Even in a volunteer military with an emphasis on valuable skills and career opportunities, soldiers still sign up for a job that they can't leave at their whim -- and in which they can be ordered to risk their lives.

Whether liberals and libertarians like it or not, the truth is that even in the freest and most individualistic of societies, the military ethic will likely always have a place. In a recent talk at a Manhattan seminar of the libertarian Cato Institute, New York University social psychologist and noted author Jonathan Haidt pointed out that loyalty and authority, just like liberty and fairness, are essential dimensions of morality; they can decline in importance as societies become less warlike, but no culture can survive without them.

What, then, do we owe veterans in modern societies? Certainly not worship or blind support for military action. When some conservatives argue that to criticize an ongoing war is disloyal to the soldiers fighting in it, that's pure demagoguery -- and a mockery of the freedom those soldiers are said to be defending. But we do owe soldiers and veterans our respect, whether or not we agree with the war.

That's a lesson we learned painfully after Vietnam, and one that should endure.